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Daenerys Targaryen at IKEA: Left-wing Populism in Spain

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The parliamentary election of June 2016 was expected to be a decisive turning point in post-Franco Spanish politics. Pre-election polls saw the newly formed alliance between Podemos and Izquierda Unida (IU) surpassing Spain's traditional Socialist party (PSOE) to become the second largest political force behind the center-right Partido Popular (PP). Given this constellation, Pablo Iglesias, Podemos's charismatic leader, appeared to be in a favorable position to become Spain's new prime minister. The election resulted in a fiasco for Unidos Podemos. Mobilizing one million fewer voters than in the December 2015 legislative elections, Unidos Podemos ended up a disappointing third behind the two major parties — and this despite PSOE's historically poor score.[1]

The disastrous result renewed tensions over the future course of Podemos, which had already flared up in the run-up to the election, provoked by the alliance with IU, a party of the traditional anti-capitalist left, dominated by the Communist Party. Substantial currents within Podemos, following Íñigo Errejón, the party's leading theorist, opposed the alliance, particularly after IU's leader, Alberto Garzón, had charged that Podemos's "populist strategy" championed by Errejón had "exhausted itself" (García de Blas and Manetto, 2016). In Garzon's view, Errejón's populist vision had engendered a process of "ideological moderation" designed to appeal to as broad a constituency as possible. On this reading, Unidos Podemos's disappointing showing in the election was a direct result of the programmatic vagueness and dilution engendered by Errejón's populist strategy. Errejón and his partisans, in turn, blamed the election result on the alliance with IU, which they deemed in open contradiction with the original Podemos project. Whereas the latter sought to transcend the traditional left-right cleavage and construct a broad social base for fundamental sociopolitical change, the alliance with IU effectively relegated Podemos to "the left-wing margins of the political spectrum", thus jeopardizing the very essence of the project (Calvajal, 2016).

In order to understand what is at stake, it is necessary to revisit the origins of Podemos, review the major ideas that informed its project, and examine its social base of support.

Podemos originated as a political experiment launched in 2014 by a small circle of intellectuals and social scientists, mostly from Complutense University in Madrid, inspired by the recent experience of Latin American populism. Adopting key ideas from Antonio Gramsci and Ernesto Laclau, they advanced a populist project designed to take advantage of the window of opportunity that had opened up three years earlier with the Movimiento 15-M, a spontaneous grassroots movement of predominantly young people protesting against the Zapatero (PSOE) government's austerity policies (Beas, 2011). The strategy was to appeal to the broad segments of the Spanish population that were suffering from the economic crisis and exhausted by the EU-imposed politics of austerity, and mobilize them by articulating disparate popular grievances and claims directed against a common enemy labelled *la casta*.

Errejón and Iglesias insisted right from the start that the central political goal behind Podemos was one thing — to take over power from Spain's self-serving and corrupt elites in order to bring about a "post-neoliberal transformation through the state" and make the institutions work for the benefit of ordinary people (Iglesias, 2015, 15). The provocative cover of a collection of essays on the popular TV series "Game of Thrones" that analyzed the narrative of the series from a social science perspective drove the point graphically home: It featured a drawing of a relaxed Pablo Iglesias comfortably seated on the Iron Throne (Iglesias, 2014*b*). In the preface to the volume, Iglesias explained some of the lessons to be learned from the series for real-life politics in current-day Spain. Arguably the most interesting observations were on the relationship between power and legitimacy. According to Iglesias, Game of

[1] Pre-election polls had Unidos Podemos at about 25 percent of the vote; they won a bit more than 21 percent.

Thrones taught that in politics there was no space for legitimacy "in the abstract, for a legitimacy that was not prepared to convert itself into alternative political power, to compete for power." Competing for power, in turn, necessitated having a "political project" that is "credible, plausible, and real" (Iglesias, 2014*b*, 7). What made Podemos competive, Iglesias insisted, was that it had an "idea," or what Errejón would call a "hypothesis."

This hypothesis was that politics is fundamentally about "the construction of meaning" through discourse; that language and discourse represent the "fundamental battle ground" for contesting the dominant narrative and constructing new collective political identities and new majorities; and that this contestation has to be informed, not by theoretical dogmas, but by the concrete claims and demands of ordinary people (Errejón, 2016). As a frequent guest on television and host of his own talk show (*La Tuerka*) broadcast on regional television and over the internet, Iglesias understood the central importance of communication for political mobilization. His communicative skills and media presence made him the natural choice for party leader. Articulate and endowed with an undeniable charisma, he became the face of Podemos.

Errejón and Iglesias believed that the prolonged socioeconomic difficulties in Spain following the 2008 financial collapse had provoked a profound crisis in the post-Franco (1978-) political regime that was reflected in "the failure of the ruling institutions — including the mainstream political parties — to preserve and renew their legitimacy" (Iglesias, 2015, 10). As a result of this legitimacy crisis, they assumed, traditional political identities had started to break up and disintegrate, opening up opportunities for a left-wing populist discourse no longer grounded in the established left-right dichotomy but resting on a new dichotomy — above/*la casta* vs. below/*la gente* — that they believed had the potential of becoming majoritarian (Errejón, 2014). They derived their optimistic reading of the Spanish situation from their experience with, and analysis of, left-wing populism in Latin America (particularly Venezuela), which, as Iglesias emphasized, "should serve as our fundamental point of reference" (Iglesias, 2014*a*, 37).

Given its founders' connections with the Chávez regime, Podemos was repeatedly charged with harboring antidemocratic, perhaps even totalitarian, tendencies (Ruiz Soroa, 2015; Delibes, 2016). Against that, its leaders maintained that Podemos was all about reclaiming democracy from the privileged minority, which had appropriated it in the post-Franco era, and restoring it to the people. In short, Podemos was fighting for fundamental political change in order to bring about true democracy in Spain.

Initially, Podemos proved highly successful. In the 2014 European elections, the party received almost eight percent of the vote, which translated into five seats in the European Parliament. This was followed by the municipal elections later that year, where Podemos's support of independent local citizen platforms was crucial for the election of progressive mayors in Madrid and Barcelona. Finally, in the national election of December 2015, Podemos became Spain's third-largest party, polling more than twenty percent of the vote. With none of the major parties in a position to form the new government, Podemos assumed a pivotal role in the new political constellation. After the failure of a series of negotiations between the major parties aimed at forming a coalition government, a new election was called for June 2016, resulting in the bitter disappointment for Unidos Podemos.

There are a number of possible explanations for the fiasco. One has to do with Podemos's social base. The "Podemos hypothesis" depended for its success on the mobilization of a broad spectrum of the electorate. In reality, as a number of studies have shown, Podemos's appeal was largely limited to a younger, better educated, predominantly urban constituency who, in ideological terms, overwhelmingly placed themselves on the (far) left (Criada Olmos and Pinta Sierra, 2015; Fernández-Albertos, 2009). Podemos supporters distinguished themselves by their high level of disenchantment with the political system and, in particular, the political class — a disenchantment informed particularly by their high sensitivity to (political) corruption (León, 2014). In addition, Podemos attracted a significantly larger proportion of men than women in every age group. A number of explanations for this gender gap have been offered, among them women's greater risk aversion; the lower labor participation rate of women; and a leadership largely dominated by men (Orriols, 2015; Claveria, 2016; Criada Olmos and Pinta Sierra, 2015, 239-240).

Secondly, the success of the "Podemos hypothesis" depended to a significant extent on the disintegration of the established partisan alignments in the wake of the fi-

nancial crisis and prolonged austerity. The resulting collapse of the post-1978 two-party system was supposed to make enough voters available for populist mobilization to secure Podemos a majority. This did not happen. If anything, the outcome of the June election shored up the established system to the detriment of the new actors (Unidos Podemos and especially Ciudadanos). This was hardly surprising given the progressive deterioration of Podemos's image among the electorate: Between late 2014 and late 2015, the number of survey respondents who said they would never vote for the party increased from 42 to 52 percent (Lavezzolo et al., 2015).

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A third reason was the alliance with IU. Not only did the alliance strain Iglesias's credibility as a political leader, it also further reinforced the perception that Podemos was a party of the radical left. Less than a year before the June election, in a major interview, Pablo Iglesias had rejected the very idea of an alliance with the extreme left. These were old leftists who, he charged, were "sad, boring and bitter," who took ordinary people for idiots addicted to trash television, who were ashamed of their own country and their own people, and who, in the final analysis, were partly responsible if nothing ever changed in the country (Picazo, Delàs and Iglesias, 2015).

Given these invectives, the alliance with IU was nothing short of a strategic U-turn, which a significant number of both parties' supporters found hard, if not impossible, to swallow. Not surprisingly, some of them stayed home (Jurado and Orriols, 2016). At the same time, the alliance threatened to relegate Podemos to the leftwing margins of the political spectrum, thus jeopardizing its populist project. In response, the party leadership reinforced its efforts to make Podemos appealing to broader constituencies. Among other things, they issued the party's election program in the style of the Ikea catalogue, which presented the party's candidates engaged in domestic activities (Iglesias, for instance, watering a plant). In order to appeal to female voters, they designed a campaign poster that featured portrayals of Unidos Podemos's leading politicians equally divided by gender (four women, four men). Finally, to appeal to mainstream, particularly older, voters, who in the past had been least disposed to vote for Podemos, the party's leaders further moderated their discourse. Pablo Iglesias, towards the end of the election campaign, promoted himself as a social democratic politician and patriot. None of these tactical maneuvers proved particularly successful.

The fiasco of the June 2016 election appears to have marked the end of Podemos's populist strategy, at least for the immediate future. This, at least, would only be logical. The title of the collected volume on the Game of Thrones mentioned earlier was, after all, "Ganar o Morir" — "Win or Die". In the short introduction to the collection, Iglesias compares Podemos to the Khaleesi Daenerys Targaryen. After the June election, the Khaleesi will have to wait another day to assume the Iron Throne.

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Multiple Traditions in Populism Research: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis

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The Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential election have attracted newfound public attention to populist politics. Despite its recent salience, however, the phenomenon has a long history on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, populist parties on both the right and the left have been gaining strength since the 1990s (March, 2007; Mudde, 2007), and populist appeals have been a staple of Democratic and Republican candidates in the United States for much of the 20th century (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Kazin, 1998). Latin American politics, of course, is well known for its populist leaders (Hawkins, 2009; Roberts, 1995, 2006). Indeed, scholars have been studying populism for decades, typically relying on case studies of individual countries or regions. This rich tradition has generated a wealth of research findings, but less consensus on how populism should be conceptualized and empirically analyzed.

The diversity of approaches to the study of populism is in part a result of the growing importance of comparative research on the topic. Theoretical orientations that prove insightful in one region are often found wanting when applied to structurally disparate cases, leading to the proliferation of definitional approaches and empirical strategies. The lack of a single shared research framework is also a consequence of the amorphous nature of populism itself. The ideal of "the sovereignty of the people" (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, 323) takes on myriad forms and shares much in common with commonplace democratic principles, which complicates a precise bounding of the concept.

Nonetheless, amidst this multiplicity of theoretical perspectives, there is some consensus concerning a minimal definition of populism, one that lends itself to comparison even if it does not capture all aspects of the phenomenon. We can think of populism as a form of politics predicated on a moral distinction between corrupt elites and the virtuous people, with the latter viewed as the sole legitimate source of political power (Laclau, 1997; Mudde, 2007). Just who the elites are varies across context, as do the boundaries of "the people", but the binary structure of populist claims is largely invariant. In addition to its moral logic, populism's anti-elite orientation often lends itself to a wholesale rejection of intermediary institutions.

This core definition is relatively uncontroversial, but scholars differ in how they interpret, operationalize, and elaborate on it. This conceptual variation can be reduced to three dominant approaches, which view populism as (i) a strategy of political mobilization, (ii) an ideology, and (iii) a form of political discourse. Although these distinctions are primarily theoretical, they have implications for how populism is measured in empirical research. In addition, there is a separate debate concerning the relationship between populism and democracy, with some scholars seeing the two as standing in tension to one another, and others arguing that they are deeply interrelated. We are ambivalent about the normative implications of populism, but we do take a position on its conceptualization: we make a case for the analytical advantages of the most minimal, discursive definition of populism that treats the phenomenon as an attribute of political claims rather than actors. We end with a series of unresolved research questions that a discursive approach to populism can help address. It is our hope that this brief — and necessarily partial —